

THE  
MUSEUM OF  
MODERN ART  
NEW YORK

708.1  
S 67

## TRUSTEES OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

John Hay Whitney, *Chairman of the Board*; Henry Allen Moe, *1st Vice-Chairman*; William A. M. Burden, *2nd Vice-Chairman*; Sam A. Lewisohn, *3rd Vice-Chairman*; Nelson A. Rockefeller, *President*; Philip L. Goodwin, *1st Vice-President*; Mrs. David M. Levy, *2nd Vice-President*; John E. Abbott, *Secretary*; Ranald H. Macdonald, *Treasurer*; Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, Stephen C. Clark, Rene d' Harnoncourt, Walt Disney, Marshall Field, A. Conger Goodyear, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, Wallace K. Harrison, James W. Husted, Henry R. Luce, David H. McAlpin, William S. Paley, Mrs. E. B. Parkinson, Mrs. Charles S. Payson, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Beardsley Ruml, James Thrall Soby, Edward M. M. Warburg, Mrs. George Henry Warren, Monroe Wheeler.

## HONORARY TRUSTEES

Frederic Clay Bartlett, Mrs. W. Murray Crane, Frank Crowninshield, Duncan Phillips, Paul J. Sachs, Mrs. John S. Sheppard.

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

by James Thrall Soby

The Museum is an educational institution: it is one by charter and in conscious purpose. Consequently, in whatever it does, in its exhibitions, publications, acquisitions and research, it feels itself responsible to the public and only indirectly to artists. By this I do not mean that the Museum is indifferent to the problems of those who create the modern arts. On the contrary, a good part of the staff's time is spent on questions affecting artists' status and welfare. But I do mean that the Museum looks on itself as educator rather than patron. Though it constantly buys the works of modern painters, sculptors, photographers and stage designers, it does not pretend that direct subsidy is its objective. Yet *indirectly* the Museum's educational activities have been of vast benefit to living artists. This is not conjecture but fact: when a poll was recently conducted by a leading art magazine to determine the cause of the great public increase in purchases of contemporary art, the Museum was named as the most important single factor. Through its educational activities the Museum has done far more to improve the lot of the advanced artist than it could have by spending any reasonable sum for direct subsidy.

When the Museum of Modern Art in New York was founded in 1929, the Trustees and the Director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., were agreed on a premise which remains in force today: that the Museum should be international in its approach to the visual arts of our time. The premise has not always been understood by the public, it has been opposed by partisans of a national standard, but it has been adhered to faithfully by the Museum itself. Now more than ever, when all over the world the war appears to have deepened rather than lessened nationalist prejudice, the Museum's internationalism seems valid and crucial. For the arts, as Mr. Barr has expressed the matter, are a kind of "visual Esperanto,"—a language which may pass



Main Frontage, 11 West 53rd Street, New York 19.

untranslated from country to country and carry with it the tolerance and understanding and appreciation now so universally needed.

In all the Museum's curatorial activities, in its loan shows, its publications and its collections, an attempt has been made to present to the public the most vital art being achieved in America and in the leading countries of Europe and Latin America. The Museum's field was early defined as extending from roughly 1880 to the present. This has been a useful rule of thumb, and it has been applied to most of the Museum's undertakings. But it has not been intended as a rigid limitation.



*Rear or Garden View. The Sculpture Garden contains many notable works from the Museum Collection. In the summer lunch and tea are served.*

Very often, for example, the Museum has exhibited the art of a much earlier time provided that art has had a special relevance to modern forms of expression; the exhibition of Prehistoric Rock Painting, with its clear reference to 20th century primitivism, is a conspicuous case in point. Similarly, the Museum has occasionally explored earlier traditions which have been in need of modern reappraisal, as in the exhibition, Romantic Painting in America, which examined a continuous yet neglected tendency in native art from the late 18th century to the present. The Museum, nonetheless, is primarily concerned with the arts of our century, and particular emphasis is given to works achieved during the past few decades.

The Museum's conception of "art" has been purposefully broad from the beginning. Indeed, soon after its founding at the generous and devoted hands of Miss Lillie Bliss, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller,

Jr., Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, Mrs. W. Murray Crane, Mr. A. Conger Goodyear, Mr. Paul Sachs and Mr. Frank Crowninshield, the Museum's Director expressed the hope that the institution would eventually devote itself to all the principal visual arts of our time. Today this plan has come true. One by one, beginning with Painting and Sculpture, the following curatorial departments have been created: Architecture, Film Library, Photography, Industrial Design, Theatre Arts, Manual Industry. All these departments take part in the curatorial activities hereafter described; all are staffed by experts in the various fields to which they relate.

In the very early years of its existence, the Museum was mainly concerned with loan exhibitions, and such exhibitions continue to be a key factor in its program. They range in size from one-gallery displays to exhibitions requiring, in very exceptional cases, all the gallery space available on the first three floors of the Museum building (the fourth and fifth floors are given over to offices, the sixth to a members' lounge). They include one-man shows, group and "theme" exhibitions; they represent significant developments in all the fields



*The Members' Penthouse with its spacious quarters is a pleasant mid-town meeting place for members and their guests. Tea is served daily.*



listed here, though by far the greatest number of shows are of painting and sculpture, including drawings and prints. More than 300 loan exhibitions were held in the Museum proper in its first 16 years, and in recent years, together with the Film Library's daily programs of moving pictures and the permanent showing of the Museum Collections, they have attracted more than half a million visitors annually.

Naturally a great number of these visitors to the Museum are also visitors to New York. Thinking of those not able to come here, the Trustees in 1933 formed a Department of Circulating Exhibitions. It has been expanded lately to include Educational Services, but its primary function remains the same: to organize national tours of exhibitions prepared by the curatorial departments or by outside authorities or by its own staff. These exhibitions vary in size, scope and character as widely as those held in the Museum itself. Some are planned for tour among the larger cities, others for small communities; some include only original works of art, others make their point through multiple processes of reproduction and may be bought outright by institutions and



*A view of one of the art classes for children conducted by the Educational Program of the Museum.*



*Daily lectures are given at regular intervals in the galleries by the docent staff. Here a group is enjoying "The Sleeping Gypsy," generally considered Rousseau's masterpiece.*

schools. All the visual arts treated by the Museum are represented in the schedule of circulating exhibitions. The department has also sent a number of shows to foreign countries, often in collaboration with the Federal Government. The department is one of two main sources of traveling exhibitions in this country, the other being the American Federation of Arts with headquarters in Washington. The two agencies operate at an annual deficit, but the Trustees of both consider the price small to pay for the resultant educational benefit to smaller cities and towns all over the country.

The Museum's loan exhibitions have brought hundreds of thousands of people an indispensable first-hand experience of modern art. But the Museum has exerted perhaps its greatest influence through its publications, of which more than 100 separate titles have been issued since 1929. In



Vincent van Gogh: *The Starry Night*. 1889. Oil, 29" x 36¼". Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, this is the first canvas by van Gogh to enter the collection of a New York Museum.

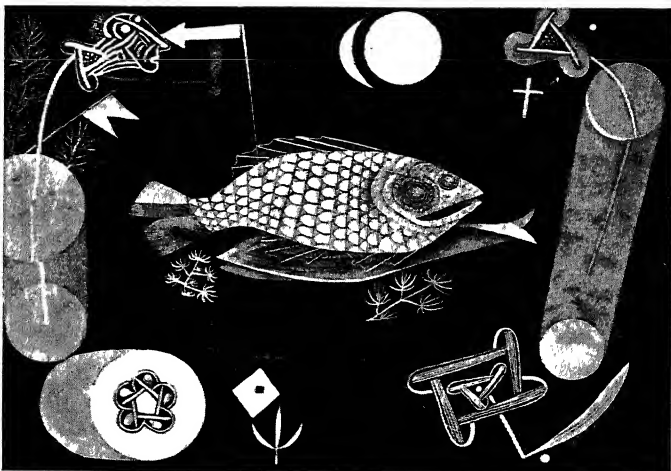
times past most of these publications were commonly referred to as "catalogs," and the majority of them continue to record, and to be based on Museum exhibitions. But more and more they have come to be regarded as books, since they usually contain numerous plates, detailed bibliographies and rather comprehensive texts by members of the staff or by qualified authorities outside the Museum. Moreover, the more important titles are issued later in revised and amplified editions, years after the shows to which they originally referred have been disbanded. Due to the paper shortage, a great number of publications are now out of print, but many are soon to be reissued.

The nearly 12,000 members of the Museum receive free each year a certain number of publications, the number depending on the category

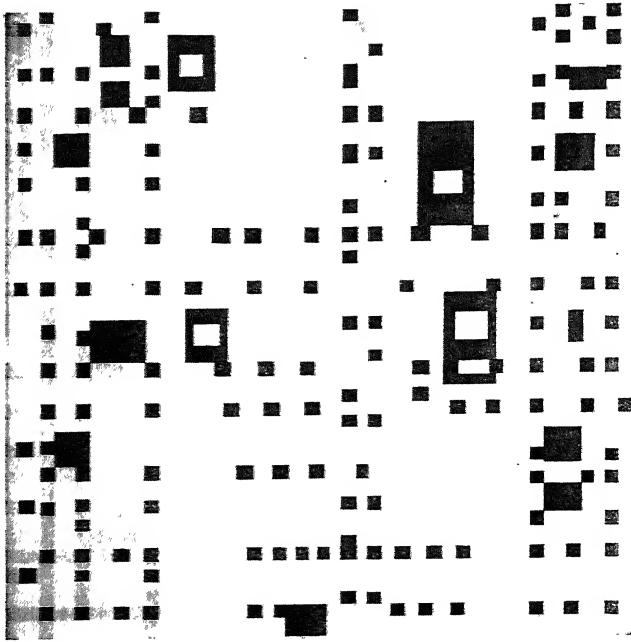
of membership subscription. With its demand from members as a backlog, the Museum has steadily increased the list and size of its editions. In 1945 a contract was signed with the well-known publishers, Simon & Schuster, for the national distribution of the Museum's books to retail outlets. Books so distributed carry the joint imprint of the Museum and Simon & Schuster, while the otherwise identical copies sent to members of the Museum carry its imprint alone. In both cases, the contents and design of the publication are determined exclusively by the Museum. The Museum has also published a number of color reproductions of outstanding modern paintings, both American and European. It plans to amplify this activity as materials become available and methods of color printing improve.



Pablo Picasso: *Girl before a Mirror*. 1932. Oil on canvas, 63¾ x 51¼". Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim.



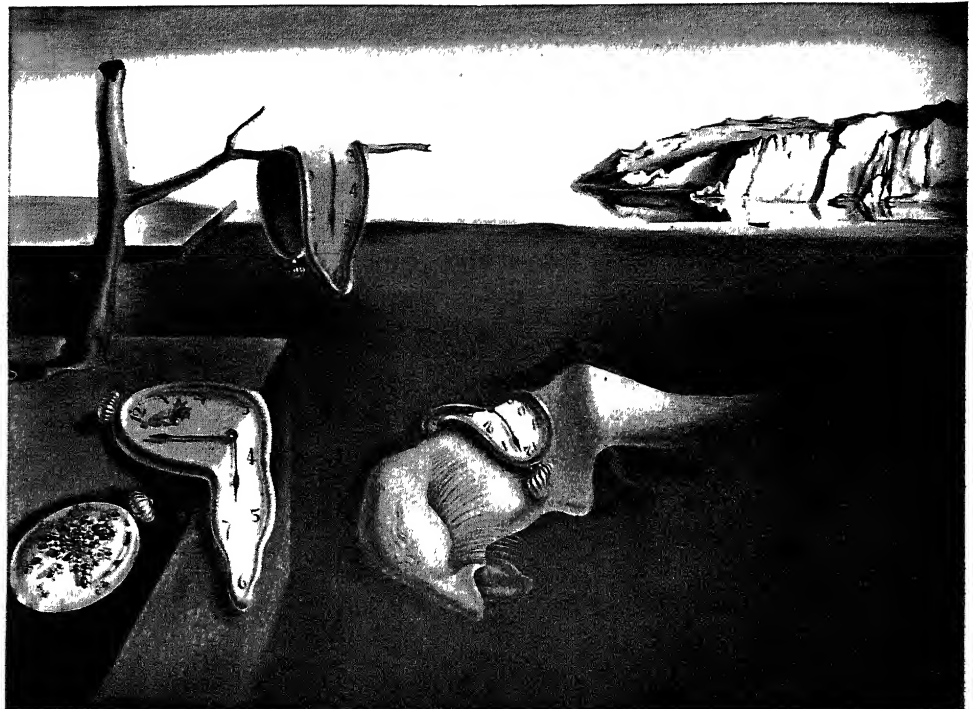
Paul Klee: *Around the Fish*. 1926. Oil on canvas, 18¾ x 25½". Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Purchase Fund.



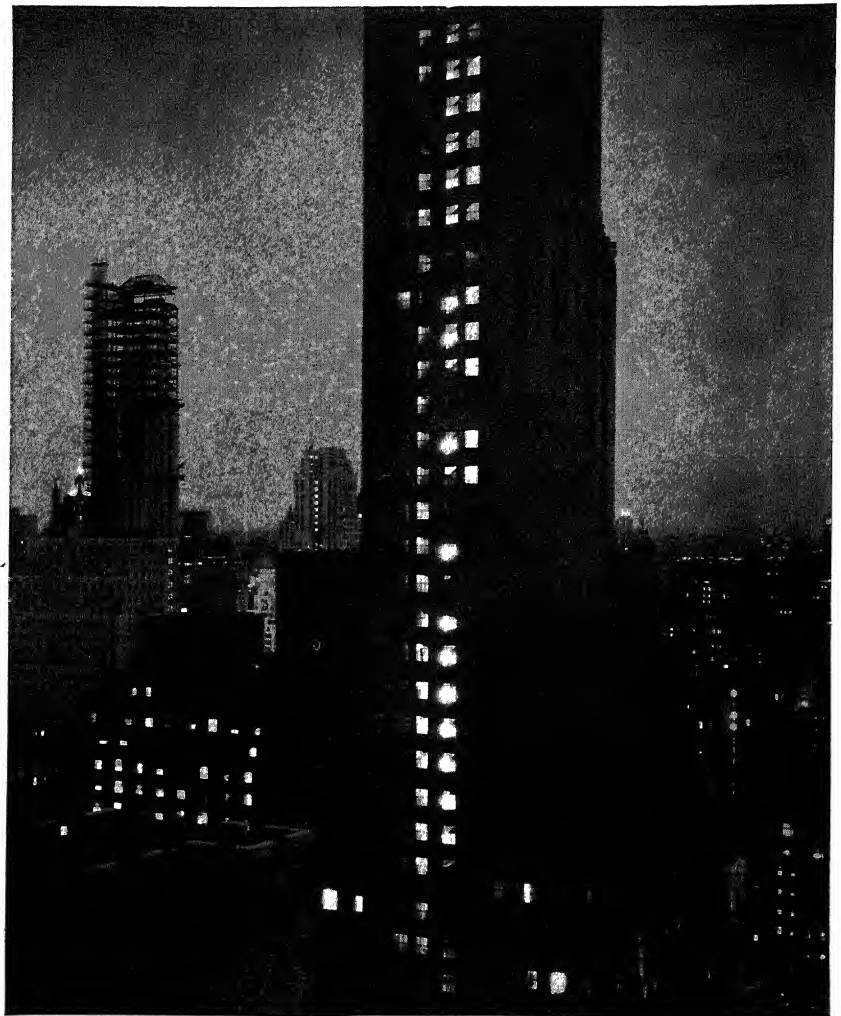
*Piet Mondrian: Broadway Boogie-Woogie. 1942-43. Oil, 50 x 50". Given anonymously.*

The Museum not only displays and publishes modern works of art, it acquires them as a crucial part of its educational program. Each of the curatorial departments has its own collection whose contents, except in the case of the Film Library, whether acquired by purchase or gift, must be approved by an acquisitions committee with the official title "Committee on the Museum Collections." The same committee determines questions of policy regarding the collections, that is, decides issues which may arise as to the character, use and function of works owned by the Museum.

Due to lack of space in the present building, none of the collections can be shown in anything like its entirety. The Museum's third floor is permanently given over to a changing display of



*Salvador Dalí: The Persistence of Memory. 1931. Oil, 10 x 14". Given anonymously.*



*Alfred Stieglitz: New York—Night 1931. The Museum of Modern Art from its inception has accepted photography as an art. It has exhibited photography since 1932, and in 1940 it set up the Department of Photography with a basic collection and a reference library—the first curatorial department devoted exclusively to photography in any museum.*

painting, sculpture, drawings and prints (supplemented by space for sculpture in the garden), but even so, less than a sixth of the painting and sculpture collection can be on view at one time. The Film Library's possessions are shown in daily programs of moving pictures in the Museum auditorium, open to the public. The collections of other curatorial departments are exhibited in gallery space allotted to them by plan but not always available due to the exigencies of the loan exhibition schedule. It is the Museum's hope that eventually, as the present crowded building is enlarged, representative selections from all the collections will be continuously on view; mean-

while serious students may have access to items not installed in the galleries. The collections are the backbone of the Museum's educational program, and furnish a continuity and standard which the constantly changing loan exhibitions can only supplement, not supply.

There is a final function of the collections which deserves mention and is not always understood. The Museum is by far the most generous single lender to its own loan exhibitions. A majority of these exhibitions, whether held in the Museum or planned for travel, borrow constantly from the collections, which frequently are able to supply works not to be found elsewhere. Furthermore,





Georges Seurat: *The Artist's Mother*. About 1884. Conte crayon, 12 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Lillie P. Bliss Collection.

the Museum whenever possible lends to sister institutions and also, in the case of important one-man shows, to dealers. As a result, the collections must be broader in scope than would be the case if they were intended only for permanent and separate display. How broad their scope is, is attested by the constant demands made on them by the staffs of other museums.

But what is in the collections? There is not room to describe them all here, but a word may be said about the two most extensive—those of the

Department of Painting and Sculpture and of the Film Library. The former contains more than 3000 items, including drawings and prints. The basis for its selection has been international, in accordance with the Museum's original premise. Yet it would not be natural if we in America did not look with special interest at the arts of our own country and feel for them a close responsibility. Thus there are more American works of art in the collection than from any other country. Nevertheless, nearly all the leading European painters of our





Charles Demuth: *Acrobats*, 1919. Watercolor, 13 x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.



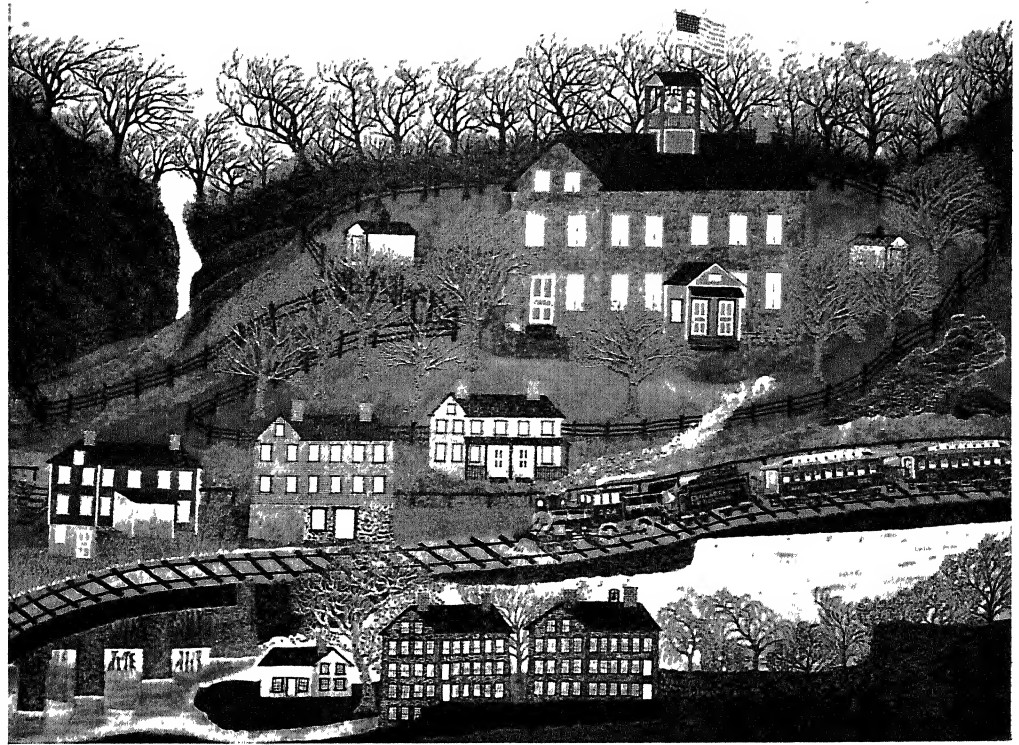
Henri Matisse: *Reclining Nude*. Lithograph, 17 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Gift of Mrs. Sadie A. May.



*José Clemente Orozco: Zapatistas. 1931. Oil, 45 x 55". Given anonymously.*

century are well represented, most of them by a minimum of several capital works. Similarly, the outstanding Latin American artists, particularly the Mexicans, have representative pictures in the collection. The collection of 20th century sculpture is quite generally conceded to be the finest and most complete in the world. In the summer of 1945 two floors of the Museum were given over to an extended showing of the Painting and Sculpture collection. The exhibition's reception by critics and the public must be considered a well-deserved tribute to Mr. Barr, now Research Director of the Museum, whose achievement the collection so largely is.

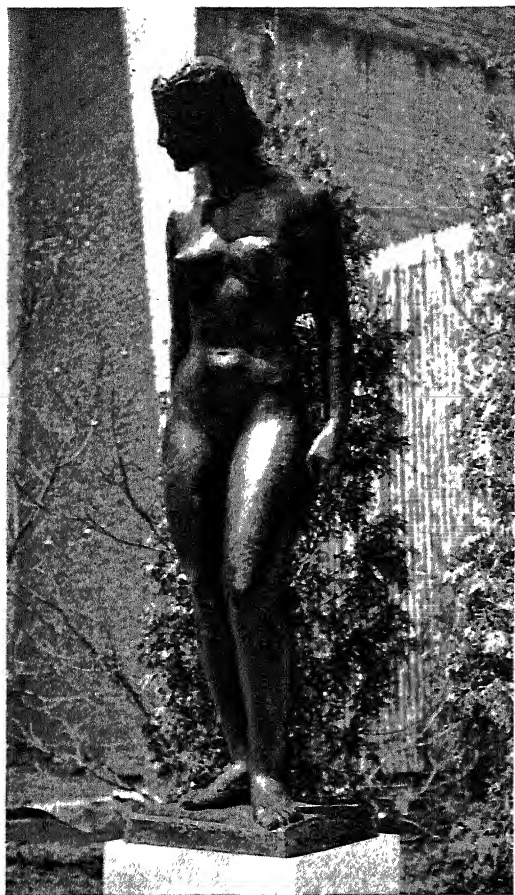
The Film Library, founded as a Museum department in 1935, has formed the most important collection of films in existence, covering the short but extraordinarily rich history of the moving pictures. Its possessions come from all over the world and are in some cases unique surviving examples. Until the Film Library began to collect and preserve them, extremely important films were being destroyed or lost or neglected once their commercial possibilities had been exhausted. And quite apart from the question of preservation, the films were formerly in drastic need of the scholarly attention to content, meaning and chronological system which had long been



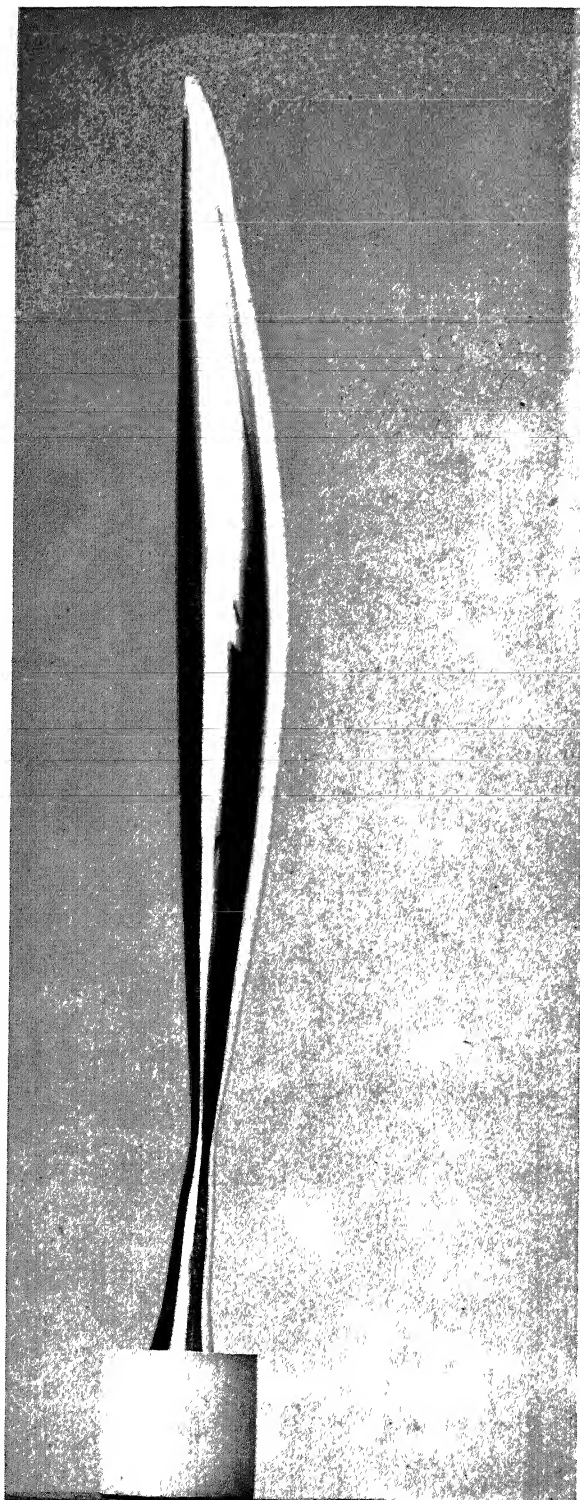
*Joseph Pickett: Manchester Valley. Probably 1914-18. Oil, 45 x 60". Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*

*Below: Edward Hopper: New York Movie. 1939. Oil on canvas, 32¼ x 40⅞". Given anonymously.*





*Charles Despiau: Assia. 1938. Bronze, about life size. Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim.*



*Constantin Brancusi: Bird in Space. 1919. Bronze, 54" high. Given anonymously.*



Alexander Calder: *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*. 1939. Mobile. Steel wire and sheet aluminum, about 15' long. Gift of the Advisory Committee.

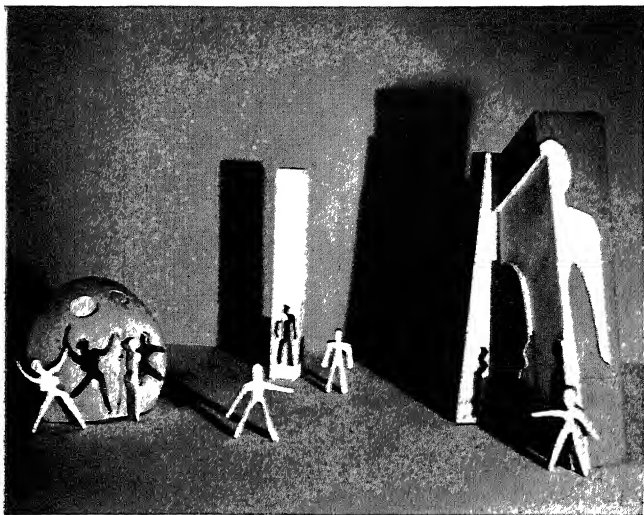
given the other visual arts. Under expert curatorial supervision the Museum's vast collection of films has been put in order. From it the United States Government during the war was able to borrow documentary films from enemy countries which were of the greatest value in estimating the aims and psychology of the Axis. Today, in peace, the films—surely the most influential visual medium of communication of our period—may be studied in the Film Library's daily programs and in its archives. The collection now forms a codified body of reference material in which professionals are naturally interested and in which laymen, by the thousands, find pleasure. As humanist documents,

as sociology, history, esthetics—the films of the Museum's collection are among its most precious treasures.

There are two additional departments which relate directly to the Museum's curatorial activities: the Registrar's office and the library. The Registrar's job, as in other museums, is the keeping of records, but it is vastly complicated in the Museum of Modern Art by the number of loan exhibitions held each year and it is carried out, I should like to add, with a care and an imaginative understanding of the potential values of records which is altogether rare.

The Museum's library is not large, and most of





*Joan Junyer: Model for three-dimensional experimental stage setting for a dance drama—from the Department of Theatre Arts. This is the first curatorial department devoted specifically to contemporary theatrical design. The department's main function is to create awareness and understanding, and to facilitate the study of the theatre arts by collecting and presenting original designs for settings and costumes. The department includes a special section on DANCE, a study collection, a large library, files and slides of pertinent material.*

its material relates to the 20th century visual arts. It is, however, extremely effective within its field: it contains not only the more important monographs, surveys and periodicals, but innumerable less common publications which the Museum's overall curatorial research has proved of special value. Its photographic scrapbooks record the principal contents of all exhibitions held in the Museum and are invaluable sources of reference; they are supplemented by folders of clippings, catalogs and factual data on the works and biographies of leading artists here and abroad. The library staff includes an assistant who handles the large volume of requests for photographs of modern works of art. A catalog is available listing black and white slides for purchase or rental. And mention must be made of the detailed bibliographies prepared by the librarians and published in the Museum's monographs on artists.



*A section of the exhibition BRAZIL BUILDS prepared by the Department of Architecture. The exhibition filled the entire ground floor gallery of the Museum and was composed of models, enlarged photographs, architectural renderings, drawings, plans, maps and a continuous screen projection of color slides. Following its initial showing, the exhibition was sent on tour by the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions—a typical example of the wide field covered by the program of this department through the distribution of Museum exhibitions all over the United States and to many foreign countries.*

*The BRAZIL BUILDS exhibition was shown in sixteen cities in the U. S. and traveled across the borders to Mexico and Canada. A smaller version was made for circulation to American schools and colleges and was shown in seventeen institutions. A special version was prepared for showing in Rio de Janeiro and later went to Sao Paulo and ten other cities in Brazil. And at the request of the Brazilian Embassy another edition was organized for showing in London.*



These bibliographies are exceptionally thorough, and rank among the Museum's most valuable contributions to that careful research in contemporary art which has always been a fundamental of its program.

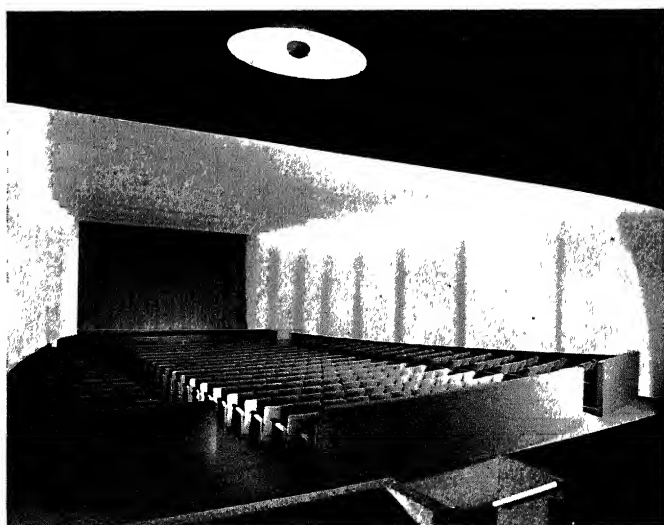
The Museum is now a well-established institution. It has been praised and gained devoted friends. It has also been berated and made enemies. It could not have done otherwise, since unlike most museums it deals almost entirely with the art of living men. It therefore deals with artists' emotions in some degree and with the emotions of their families and friends and supporters. It deals, too, with the opposing public forces of reaction and progress which dispute the worth of today's art bitterly, often for extraneous reasons. But the Museum has stood its ground. It has affirmed and reaffirmed its faith in the strong creative talents of our time. It has not, however, tried to impose a direction on contemporary painting and sculpture nor to support a single viewpoint, though partisans of a given ideal have often wished it to. It has considered that it should follow artists, not lead them, and it has been willing to follow them in any direction which seemed to promise a valid contemporary expression—abstraction, realism, romanticism, expressionism, surrealism, and so on.

Gradually, I think, this impartial position of the Museum is coming to be understood and appreciated as the key to its educational function. And no one can fairly review the Museum's record without realizing how far-reaching an influence it has been in furthering a comprehension and love of the modern arts. Its future plans will fill many lacunae in its past curatorial accomplishment. Its present high status is the result of three main factors in its growth: the generosity and hard work of its Trustees; the far-sighted planning of its original Director, Mr. Barr; and the devotion and skill of its staff, from its department heads to those astonishing craftsmen in the Museum workshops who have contributed so much to the Museum's enviable reputation for the careful installation of the works shown in its galleries.



*Film still of Greta Garbo in her first important film, The Story of Gosta Berling, produced in Sweden in 1924. Garbo's career, like the careers of most of the important film artists in the world, may be traced through the motion pictures in the international archives of the Museum's Film Library.*

*Below: the lecture hall of the Museum of Modern Art. Seating 496, it is used extensively for talks, symposiums, and chamber music concerts as well as for the daily exhibitions of Film Library programs.*





*An exhibition sponsored by the Industrial Design Department of furniture designed by Charles Eames using rubber shock-mounts electronically glued to metal and plywood. Backs and seats are molded of plywood to fit the human form. Coffee tables and dining tables that ship flat were also exhibited, as were storage cases with simple decorative box-joint corners and molded drawers. All the furniture was based on designs which won Eames and his colleague, Eero Saarinen, a first prize in the Museum's Organic Design Competition in 1940. This furniture exhibited in 1946 comes closer to using the advantages of modern American production techniques for the benefit of the purchaser—in regard to comfort, quality and price—than any design thus far shown publicly.*